

France reaches 'painful' landmark of 20,000 virus dead

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France on Monday announced it had become the fourth country worldwide to register over 20,000 deaths from the novel coronavirus, after recording 547 new fatalities in the epidemic.

"Tonight, our country has passed a barrier that is symbolic and particularly painful," top health official Jerome Salomon told reporters.

He announced that the country's total death toll was 20,265, while welcoming new falls in the numbers in hospital and intensive care.

Salomon noted that the [coronavirus](#) death toll was now well above the 14,000 people who died in France's worst recent flu epidemic and even topped the 19,000 killed by the 2003 heatwave.

France is the fourth country to record more than 20,000 deaths, following the United States—by far the worst affected worldwide—Italy and Spain.

Its [death](#) toll includes 12,513 people who died in hospital and 7,752 people who lost their lives in old people's homes and other [nursing homes](#).

But Salomon also welcomed data indicating that a person with COVID-19 in France was now infecting on average fewer than one other person, as opposed to three before the country went into lockdown more than a month ago.

"This is how we will manage to put the brakes on the epidemic," he said.

The number of people in [intensive care](#) infected with COVID-19 fell for the 12th day in a row, by 61 patients to 5,863.

"The fall... is being confirmed but it remains very slight," said Salomon.

Meanwhile the number of patients in hospital fell by 26—the sixth successive daily decrease—to 30,584.

'Collective immunity low'

France has been in lockdown since March 17 in a bid to slow the spread of the epidemic. But President Emmanuel Macron announced last week that the lockdown could begin to be eased from May 11.

Schools could gradually reopen then but cafes, cinemas and cultural venues would remain closed, and there could be no summer festivals until mid-July at the earliest.

Unlike some European countries, France has been giving daily tolls of deaths in nursing homes.

In one old people's home in Mars-la-Tour in the northeastern Moselle region, 22 of 51 residents out died from COVID-19 over the last two weeks, its director said.

In a press conference on Sunday, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe warned it would take a long time to defeat the [epidemic](#), emphasising the initial easing would only be partial.

"Our life from May 11 will not be like our life before, not immediately, and probably not for a long time," he said.

Salomon said data indicated less than 10 percent of the population in France had been infected with the virus, noting this meant there was going to be no herd immunity in the country on May 11.

"The levels of immunity are probably higher in the areas that have been worst affected," he said.

"The collective immunity in France is low, as many other countries are indicating as well."

France has 114,657 confirmed cases, but officials say the real figure is much higher due to a lack of testing.

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